Conseil du statut de la femme

# **Sex** in the media: obstacle to **equal relationships**

## Summary

Conseil du statut de la femme
Québec

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The Conseil du statut de la femme has long been concerned with the sexual models portrayed in the media and their possible effects on society. Observing the use of images of a female body in advertising industry, in a way sometimes as insistent as brainwashing, led the Council to sound the alarm in the late 1970s. In an advisory report submitted even before the government adopted its first comprehensive policy on the status of women, the Council asserted: [Translation] "Advertising encourages [...] the male fantasy of the woman as a sexual object by presenting her as a reward for the strength, courage and protection afforded by the virile being."[1] As far back as almost 30 years ago, the Council denounced the salience of stereotypes that are unfavourable to women in advertising messages.

In the early 1980s, in response to the increasingly visible propagation of pornographic images, the Council led a vast reflection on this issue. Deploring the excessive accessibility of pornographic images, it was concerned about the consequences of exposure to this type of material for young people. It also drew attention to the risk of child exploitation by the pornography industry. The Council defined pornography as [Translation] "[...] the instrument of replication of a violent and stereotyped sexuality that we all experience to different degrees."[2]

More recently, the Council focused on another agent of sexualization of the public sphere, noticeably prevalent in young people's media world: videoclips. It published in 1992 a study on the image of women in videoclips. Based on the analysis of some 230 video clips broadcast on television, the authors of the study established that, in these media messages:

> [Translation] "Gender relations are also centred primarily on seduction [...] — most of the time physical with a strong sexual connotation —, on women's submission to men [...]."[3]

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[1] Conseil du statut de la femme, Pour les Québécoises: égalité et indépendance, Québec, the Council, 1978, p. 73.

[2] Lise DUNNIGAN, Pourquoi dénoncer la pornographie? Une reformulation du problème s'impose, Québec, Conseil du statut de la femme, 1981.

[3] François BABY, Johanne CHÉNÉ and Hélène DUGAS, *Les femmes dans les vidéoclips : sexisme et violence*, Québec, Conseil du statut de la femme, 1992.

Lastly, in 2004, the Council informed the government of its concern regarding the emergence of new expressions of sexual stereotypes in the media world. It was worried about the early sexualization of young girls, claiming that [Translation] "the consumer industry, the sexualization of the models presented, the tyranny of fashion and the resultant obsession with thinness condition young girls to be dependent on men and reinforce the role of the woman as object. "[4]

The intrusion of sexuality into the public sphere and new findings into the scientific evidence about the consequences of this phenomenon have now prompted the Council to share its reflections on the subject and to formulate recommendations to curb its negative consequences.

The advertising industry, the sexualization of the models used and the tyranny of fashion condition young girls to subject themselves to the judgment of men and reinforce the role of the **woman as object**

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[4] Conseil du statut de la femme, *Vers un nouveau contrat social pour l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes*, Québec, the Council, 2004, p. 28.

# Sex **education**

Parents are, of course, responsible for transmitting basic information about sexual life to children and adolescents. They share their view of friendship, love, self-esteem and respect for others and teach them to exercise caution, most often in an informal manner. In addition, two government departments have responsibilities regarding sex education: the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS).

According to the new Québec Education Program, sex education is one of the broad areas of learning. As such, it must be considered in the teaching of all subjects and in the framework of complementary educational services given in schools. In the past, sexual education was addressed in the personal and social education program, but the abolition of this program and, consequently, of any formal sexual education content, gives us reason to fear that all students do not have equal access to a good teaching of the principles of sexual equality.

In addition to the work accomplished in schools, the MSSS supports youth sexuality education in collaboration with the MELS. Educational tools available on the MSSS Website and in health and social services centers are designed to raise young people's awareness of issues related to their sexuality: how to prevent unwanted pregnancy, protection against sexually transmitted infections, contraception, education about sexuality without violence. *The SexEducator*, a quarterly magazine published since winter 2005, is one such tool. The magazine is written for 12- to 18-year-olds and for personnel who offers sex education activities for youth. Advertising campaigns launched by the MSSS promote safe and healthy sexuality to young people. Tel-jeunes, another tool, is a community organization created in 1991 to receive and respond to young people's questions. Funded by the MSSS, it answered 51 125 calls or e-mails in 2006-2007.

The abolition of the personal and social education program and, consequently, of any formal **sexual education** content, gives us reason to fear that all students do not have equal access to quality teaching of the principles of sexual **equality**.

# Socialization

Socialization theory provides an ideal framework for studying the probable consequences for young people of the phenomenon we refer to as "sexualization of the public sphere." This theory holds that future citizens will be progressively shaped by their social environment.

The agents of socialization are many: naturally we think of the family and school, where children's primary socialization takes place. Socialization continues under the influence of peers (the peer group), when the individual chooses a group to belong to, and in the political sphere when he or she participates, as a citizen, in the political game. The media in the public sphere (music, fashion and advertising, in particular) constitute other agents of socialization.

Mechanisms at work in socialization, such as **stereotypes**, contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities between men and women.

The Canadian historian Edward Shorter, in his essay on the family published in 1975, anticipated the rise of the peer group as an agent of socialization, a consequence of the transformation of the family that came about in the West with the advent of modernity.[5] In contemporary Quebec, we are also seeing an increase in the socializing role of peer groups. This phenomenon is heightening the influence of sexual models portrayed in media in the public sphere. By perpetuating and encouraging the trends suggested by fashion, youth culture is increasingly exposing children and adolescents to influences that are distinct from their parents' values. Indeed, these influences are cause for concern.

Moreover, feminist theories have highlighted the role of socialization in perpetuating inequalities between men and women. In fact, feminists have demonstrated that the mechanisms at work in socialization constitute powerful tools for perpetuating social gender relations. It is during this process of socialization tinged with sexism that the sexual models omnipresent in the public sphere reach the adolescent population. Following feminist thinking, the real issue is the social significance of the differences between men and women. It concerns the social use that is made of these differences.

Integrating the right to equality between men and women into a broad understanding of sexuality leads us to adopt the term "egalitarian sexuality." The characteristics of this sexuality are based on our definition of equality and are closely akin to the definition of sexuality proposed by the MELS. We examine the sexualization of the public sphere through the media from this perspective.

The **agents of socialization**
- Family and school.
- Peer group.
- Media in the public sphere, including music, advertising and the Internet.

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[5] Edward SHORTER, *The Making of the Modern Family*, New York: Basic Books, 1977.

## The ideal of sexual **equality**

The description of sexual equality emerges from an exhaustive analysis of the Council's reflections on sexuality.[6] This ideal of equality served as a guide in preparing this advisory report. We have grouped the characteristics into three categories: biological, psychological and social.

On the biological level, the Council favours a sexuality based on knowledge and respect for the body, one's own and that of one's partner. For adolescent girls and boys, this means knowing how to cope with the physical transformations and discovery of their body. How they experience this physical, emotional and mental transformation strongly influences their identity construction process. To mark the rupture that adolescence represents, sociologist Caroline Moulin even speaks of identity reconstruction. [Translation] "[In adolescence,] the reconstruction of social gender relations occurs under the effect of hitherto unknown games of attraction. To this dynamic of encounter, adolescents bring a body that they must accept, control, codify."[7] Sexual equality relies on safe sexual practices, access to contraception and shared responsibility for contraception between sexual partners.

The second category of characteristics is drawn from psychology. In the Council's view, it is fundamental that partners see each other as subjects of their sexuality rather than as sexual objects. Thus sexual equality should allow the assertion and consideration of each partner's desires, needs, expectations and limitations. Sexuality experienced in this way would be a source of self-realization by contributing to the development and maintenance of good self-esteem. Lastly, the Council has always advocated a sexuality that respects oneself and others, in a spirit of mutuality. This sexuality must therefore also be free of violence, domination or obligation.

The last category of characteristics identified comes from the social field. As we saw in the previous section, the media's influence is all the greater since it is shared and valued by the peer group. Thus, cognizant of the overriding influence of the social environment on the development of young people's identity, the Council has applied itself to impressing upon them the importance of developing a critical sense regarding the sexual behaviours suggested socially. Furthermore, the Council has given special attention to promoting a sexuality free of sexual stereotypes.

The Council's definition of sexual equality is based on characteristics grouped into three categories:

- **Biological**: knowledge and respect for the body, safe sexual practices, access to contraception and shared responsibility for contraception.
- **Psychological**: the acknowledgement of partners as subjects of their sexuality rather than as sexual objects and the absence of violence, domination or obligation.
- **Social**: a sexuality free of sexual stereotypes

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[6] Some twenty Conseil du statut de la femme publications were studied. Most of these documents are available on the Council's Website [www.csf.gouv.qc.ca].

[7] Caroline MOULIN, *Féminités adolescentes*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005, p. 59.

# The **failure** of the fight against stereotypes

Sexuality permeates the public sphere and the advertising image of women is often reduced to the level of an object that sells. That shows, according to the Conseil du statut de la femme, the persistence of sexual stereotypes in the media and, consequently, in society. It would appear that past attempts to alter social gender relations and fight sexual stereotypes have failed.

The Council believes it is time to consider the harmful effects on 12- to 18-year-olds of a sexualized public sphere. Adolescence is a period of "identity reconstruction," a time of change, of new aspirations and sometimes of a reappraisal of long-standing values. It is at this time that social gender relations take shape in the individual, making him or her particularly receptive to prevailing models. While it is true that adolescent girls and boys are influenced by certain media messages to the point of changing their relations with their partner, it is the construction of the sexual identity of the adults of tomorrow that is at stake.

We are taking part to the debate on the sexualization of the public sphere, convinced that, ultimately, successful sex education will lead young people to value, in reality and in media messages, sexual behaviours and gender relationships that are equal. Should this come to be, the production of sexual messages that are unfavourable or degrading to women would cease, since they would not sell anymore, no longer being of any interest to the young public.

The Council believes it is time to consider the harmful effects of the sexualization of the public sphere on 12- to 18-year-olds. The construction of the **sexual identity** of the adults of tomorrow is at stake.

# Young people's favourite **media**

Young girls' clothing along with the emergence of new sociosexual realities are a cause for concern for both youth sexuality experts and parents alike. At the same time, in recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of messages of a sexual nature appearing in the media used by young people. The Council believes these disturbing phenomena are symptoms of a more profound problem: the conception of a sexuality based on unequal relations between men and women and how this sexuality appears to resonate with the adolescent public.

The space the media occupies in each individual's environment is considerable. This can also be observed, often more strikingly so, in young people's lives. Their use of the Internet continues to grow, as does their interest in foreign television programs, magazines and music and, consequently, their use of media over which it is difficult to exercise any control with respect to content.

In 2004, according to Statistics Canada data, 12- to 17-year-olds spent an average of 13.5 hours a week watching television, down three hours from the figure reported in 1999. However, Internet use in the 12- to 18-year-old population has risen significantly, so much so that this medium is now central to young people's lives. In 2006, 93% of 12- to 18-year-olds reported having access to the Internet at home, most by means of a high-speed connection. Surfing without any particular purpose is the preferred activity of 74% of young Internet surfers.

Young people use the Internet mainly as a means of communication. Most use instant messaging such as *MSN Messenger* and e-mail on a daily basis. Moreover, the latter two, which girls use more than boys (disparity of over 7 percentage points), constitute young people's most frequent activities on the Internet. This does not preclude the Internet from being a preferred source of information and documentation for them. Online games are used by 72% of boys and 50% of girls.

**Did you know?**

- In 2004, 12- to 17-year-olds spent an average of 13.5 hours a week watching **television**, down three hours from the figure reported in 1999.
- Their use of the Internet is growing. In 2006, 93% of 12- to 18-year-olds reported having access to the **Internet** at home.
- Surfing without any particular purpose is the preferred activity of 74% of young Internet surfers.
- Young people use the Internet mainly as a means of communication.
- 72% of boys and 50% of girls use **online games**.

Music is also central to young people's lives with 90% reporting that they listen to music very or quite often.[8] The music world of young people in Quebec consists almost exclusively of English-language music, as was revealed in a survey conducted by the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications in 1999. Young people aged 15 to 24 listen to very little French-language music. [Translation] "These listening behaviours, as well as the domination of English-language music on the Quebec market, are believed to lead young people to adhere to the values transmitted by English-language music."[9] This situation illustrates the absence of borders with respect to the models presented to young people in Québec.

**Music** is central to young people's lives with 90% reporting that they listen to music very or quite often. They prefer English-language music by far, hence the absence of borders with respect to the models presented.

Advertising, omnipresent in the public sphere, prevails everywhere without individuals choosing to be consumers. It is found both in traditional media, i.e., television, radio, magazines and newspapers, and in new media: Internet, e-mail and cellphone.

In Quebec, "commercial" advertising intended for persons under 13 years of age has been prohibited since 1980, unless it appears in a magazine intended for children, if it announces a show intended for children or if it is "constituted by a store window, a display, a container, a wrapping or a label." Even in these cases, the advertisement must respect the conditions provided for in the regulations of the *Consumer Protection Act*. However, while advertising directed at persons under 13 years of age is prohibited, an advertisement may be contained in printed matter intended for both persons under 13 years of age and for persons 13 years of age and over. Consequently, magazines read by 9- to 15-year-old girls may contain advertising messages directed at persons under 13 years of age.

The adolescent population constitutes a growing consumer group: in the United States, adolescents spent 170 billion in 2002. This is why advertisers have focused on them. It is estimated that children see an average of 20 000 advertisements each year. By the age of 12, they have seen 140 000 advertising messages and, by age 19, this number has doubled to 300 000 messages.[10]

**Advertising is omnipresent** in the public sphere. Young people constitute a growing consumer group: by the age of 12, they have seen 140 000 advertising messages and, by age 19, this number has doubled to 300 000 messages.

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[8] Rosalie NOËL-SÉGUIN, *Les pratiques culturelles des jeunes de 15 à 35 ans en 1999*, Québec, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications, 2000, p. 7.

[9] *Idem*, p. 8.

[10] Liliane ESCOBAR-CHAVES, Susan TORTOLERO, Christine MARKHAM, Barbara LOW, Patricia EITEL and Patricia THICKSTUN, "Impact of the media on adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviours", Pediatrics, Vol. 116, No. 1, July 2005, p. 303-326.

# **Sex** in the media

Sexuality permeates television today. In the United States, the proportion of programs with sexual content broadcast during prime time rose from 67% in 1998 to 77% in 2005.[11] Furthermore, among shows with sexual content, the number of sex-related scenes per hour has also increased. Lastly, among the top 20 most-watched shows by young people, 70% had sexual content.[12]

Similarly, sexuality is a major element of the virtual world. Moreover, access to sexual messages is made easier by the Internet which allows sexual content to be viewed in total anonymity. The theme of sexuality ranks first or second among the most-searched subjects on the Internet.[13] A survey conducted in Québec in 2007 of 439 12- to 17-year-olds who surf the Internet revealed that 56% visited pornographic sites, 31% had conversations of a sexual nature on the Internet and 15% visited or still visit dating sites.

However, only 16% of young people in Secondary 1 to 5 reported visiting porn sites on purpose during the current school year. Boys are more likely to visit these sites than girls since 31% to 36% admit to having visited them on purpose, which is the case for only 3% to 8% of girls of the same age.[14] Note that 55% of young people who reported visiting porn sites during the school year say they did so by accident.

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Access to sexual messages is made easier by the Internet which allows sexual content to be viewed in total **anonymity**. In 2007, 56% of 12- to 17-year-olds reported having visited pornographic sites.

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[11] Dale KUNKEL, Keren EYAL, Keli FINNERTY, Erica BIELY and Edward DONNERSTEIN, *Sex on TV4 Executive Summary 2005: A Kaiser Family Foundation Report*, [online], Menlo Park, Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005, p. 14, [www.kff.org] (consulted June 14, 2007). For the purposes of this study, sexual content is defined as "any depiction of sexual activity, sexually suggestive behaviour, or talk about sexuality or sexual activity."

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Joseph LÉVY, *Internet et les jeunes : des risques à la prévention*, presentation to the Conseil du statut de la femme, February 2006.

[14] Media Awareness Network, *Young Canadians in a Wired World – Phase II: Student Survey*, Montréal, the Network, 2005, p. 60-62.

## A stereotyped **view**

The fashion, cosmetics, music, magazine and movie market increasingly targets 8- to 13-year-old girls. A whole range of beauty products and clothing has been developed for this clientele which is urged to believe that beauty, popularity and happiness are connected. Young girls continue to be encouraged to adhere to fashion and beauty standards, to satisfy other people's needs and to be willing to do anything to attract boys' attention, seduce them and make sure the romantic relationship succeeds. Hence, according to Bouchard and Boily, [Translation] "in teen girl magazines, the construction of the 'feminine' identity is reduced to an eternal quest for one's partner's consideration and approval."[15]

Today, television continues to broadcast many programs that perpetuate sexual stereotypes. An example in kind is TV reality shows whose immense popularity illustrates, in the Council's view, the salience of stereotypes. Similarly, advertising directed at girls confines them to feminine roles at the heart of the gender relations dynamic. To charm, to please, to seduce: this epitomizes the role played by girls in advertising.

To charm, to please, to seduce: this epitomizes the role played by girls in advertising.

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[15] Pierrette BOUCHARD, Natasha BOUCHARD and Isabelle BOILY, *La sexualisation précoce des filles*, Montréal, Éditions Sisyphe, 2005.

# The probable **impact** of exposure to sexual content

A review of the scientific literature on the potential impact of the sexualization of the media on young people in the United States has convincingly demonstrated that exposure to sexual content in the media alters the sexual behaviour of adolescent girls and boys.

Early sexual intercourse is one effect of the sexualization of the media on the young public. Indeed, studies have found an important association between the amount of sexual content viewed by young people on television and their decision to engage in sexual activity in the following year. Other studies have proven that listening to a particular type of popular music (music described as degrading by the authors of the study) may contribute to their engaging in sexual activity at an earlier age.

We may wonder whether girls really choose to become sexually active at an earlier age or whether it is the effect of media pressure. Would these young girls adopt the same type of sexuality if they were not influenced by pornography in the media? Furthermore, do young people who become sexually active at any earlier age have all the information they need to make an informed decision with respect to the consequences of exercising their sexuality? These questions are vitally important when we consider the characteristics of sexual equality. The Council believes that it is imperative that both men and women feel free to experience their sexuality without any restrictions, be it in a heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual context.

Exposure to sexual content in the media is also believed to be instrumental in causing young people to subscribe to sexual stereotypes. Be it through music, video clips, advertising or television, studies have shown that adolescents who are repeatedly exposed to stereotyped portrayals of sexuality are at risk of appropriating and integrating these stereotypes into their own sexual life. Yet the exercise of sexuality should strive towards an outlook free of sexual stereotypes.

Exposure to sexual content on television also influences young people's expectations with respect to sex and this influence varies depending on the gender of the respondents. For young men, exposure to sexual content is associated with expectations of a wide variety of sexual activities, which is consistent with the socialization of men that is focused on seeking pleasure. For young women, such exposure alters their expectations with respect to their decision to advance the discovery of their sexuality, which coincides with the responsibility they are assigned socially to set the time for initiating sexual activity for the couple.

Exposure to **sexual content** in the media has an impact on young people's sexual behaviour:

- Early sexual intercourse and increased incidence of sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections.
- Adherence to sexual stereotypes and obsession with body image.
- Modification of expectations with respect to sexual activity
- Abuse in romantic relationships.

As was concluded by the task force on violent images on television commissioned by the Minister for Culture and Communication in France in 2002, viewing pornographic images can be very harmful for children and adolescents.

Recent observations made by a working group mandated by the Conseil du statut de la femme to consult young people in Quebec about their views on gender equality issues concur. Nearly all the young people surveyed (90%) said that they believed that pornography on the Internet projected a negative image of girls and boys. Sixty-two percent thought that pornography projected a negative image of both sexes, while 28% thought that it was degrading to girls in particular. One respondent declared: [Translation] "It really is more degrading for women than for men. Guys always come across as all-powerful and the girl looks easy."[16] The violence it contains is seen by several as the reason for the negative influence of pornography disseminated on the Internet. Many stressed that pornography on the Internet could cause girls to mimic what they have seen to "prove" their love to their partner.

The study conducted by the Council's working group brings a glimmer of hope concerning sexualization in the public sphere. It has shown that high school students in Quebec are exercising their critical judgment since they are able to detect the degrading aspects of the images of women portrayed in video clips.

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[16] Working group on youth, Que pensent les ados de l'égalité entre les gars et les filles? Rapport de consultation auprès des jeunes d'écoles secondaires, Québec, Conseil du statut de la femme, 2007 (unpublished).

# Data on youth **sexuality** in Québec

Young people are becoming sexually active at an increasingly early age. In Québec today, 22% of girls report having had sexual intercourse by age 14 or 15, while 17% of boys say they have done so.[17]

For 16-year-olds who report being sexually active, the average age of first sexual intercourse is 14.5 years, that is, 14.6 years among girls and 14.5 years among boys, according to the Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ).[18] These findings are consistent with those of a Canadian study, where the average age of first sexual intercourse was 14.1 years for boys and 14.5 years for girls in Secondary 5 who were sexually active.[19]

Did you know?

- In Québec today, 22% of girls report having had sexual intercourse by age 14 or 15.
- For 16-year-olds who report being sexually active, the average age of first sexual intercourse is 14.5 years.

Data from another survey indicate that age of first sexual intercourse with penetration has fallen. This data reveals that, at the time of the survey, 15% of 15- to 29-year-olds had their first sexual intercourse with penetration before age 15 whereas this proportion decreases to 8% for 30- to 39-year-olds, to 4% for 40- to 49-year-olds and to 3% for 50- to 59-year-olds.[20]

Young people are not always willing participants in sexual intercourse. In Canada, among students in Secondary 3, 2.7% of boys and 5% of girls had sex when they did not want to. In Secondary 5, the rate is 6% for boys and 11% for girls.[21]

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[17] This was revealed in a recent Statistics Canada study based on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (1998-1999 and 2000-2001 cycles). See Didier GARRIGUET, "Early sexual intercourse", *Health Reports*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Ottawa, Statistics Canada, Catalogue No. 82-003-XIF, May 2005, p. 9-18.

[18] Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Enquête sociale et de santé auprès des enfants et des adolescents québécois 1999*, Coll. La santé et le bien-être, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 2002, p. 278.

[19] Council of Ministers of Education, Canadian Youth, Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Study: Factors influencing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, Toronto, the Council, 2003, p. 83.

[20] Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Enquête sociale et de santé 1998*, Coll. La santé et le bien-être, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 2000, p. 206.

[21] Council of Ministers of Education, *Canadian Youth, Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Study: Factors influencing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, op. cit.*, p. 107.

Types of abuse other than sexual coercion can occur in young people's romantic relationships. Among 16-year-old girls who had dated a boy in the previous year, 34% reported experiencing psychological abuse, 20% physical abuse and 11% sexual abuse.[22] When 16-year-old boys were asked about their abusive behaviour towards girls in a romantic relationship, 19% said that they had inflicted psychological abuse, 10% physical abuse and 4% sexual abuse.[23]

Moreover, the most recent statistical data on partner abuse reveal that abuse is becoming more prevalent in the romantic relationships of 12- to 17-year-olds. While the overall rate of partner abuse offences rose by 1% in 2005-2006, it shot up by 16% among 12- to 17-year-olds. Furthermore, the number of offences reported to have been committed in the romantic relationships of 12- to 17-year-olds rose by 20% for girls, while it fell by 16% for boys.[24]

The most recent statistical data on **partner abuse** reveal that abuse is becoming **more prevalent** in the romantic relationships of 12- to 17-year-olds. In 2005-2006, the number of such offences reported rose by 20% for girls.

It appears relevant to relate the abuse occurring in young people's romantic relationships to the fact that pornography is omnipresent and normalized in the media.

The prevalence of sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections among adolescents, both boys and girls, is a growing public health concern. This prevalence may be associated with the early sexual intercourse encouraged by the media, all the more so since experts on the sexual messages presented in the media categorically state that they do not include any reference to issues concerning the transmission of sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections.

Chlamydia is the most common notifiable infection in Québec. The number of cases reported doubled between 1997 and 2004 and has remained stable at a high level since 2005. Women accounted for three quarters of cases reported in 2007. Young people aged 15 to 24 had the highest rate of infection. In fact, 72% of female cases reported and 49% of male cases reported were in this age group.[25]

Young people aged 15 to 24 have the highest rate of **chlamydia** infection. The rate of **gonorrhea infection** increased by **250%** among 15- to 19-year-old girls.

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[22] Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Enquête sociale et de santé 1998*, *op. cit.*, p. 475.

[23] *Idem*, p. 477.

[24] Ministère de la Sécurité publique, *Statistiques 2006 sur la criminalité commise dans un contexte conjugal au Québec*, Québec, the Ministère, 2007, p. 20 and 23.

[25] Bureau de surveillance et de vigie du ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, *Portrait des infections transmissibles sexuellement et par le sang (ITSS) au Québec*, Québec, Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, 2007, p. 6. Note that the rates are not provided in the study.

Gonorrhea is the second most common sexually transmitted and blood-borne infection. According to the most recent figures, the number of cases reported rose by 68% between 2004 and 2007. The increase was 3.5 times higher among women than among men and the fastest rate of increase was observed among 15- to 19-year-old girls, with a rise of 250%. Women accounted for 29% of gonorrhea cases in 2006 and 18% in 2004. Lastly, in the 15- to 24-year-old age group, girls and young women accounted for 49% of cases reported.[26]

The higher rate of sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections among young people is due to the frequency of unprotected sexual intercourse in this population. Indeed, a recent survey indicated that more than one quarter (26%) of sexually active adolescents reported not using a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse.[27] This survey reveals the lack of information young people and their parents have on sexuality and sexual health. It emerges that more than two thirds of adolescents and more than three out of every four mothers reported not having the information they needed about sexuality and sexual health.

On the subject of the relationship that exists between the rise in sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections and the sexualization of the public sphere, Dr. John Carsley, from Montreal's Public Health Department, declared: [Translation] "It's very hard to change sexual behaviour. Especially since what society portrays on the Internet, in the media, in newspapers, is always a risk-free sexuality."[28]

The **prevalence of sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections** among young people may be associated with the **early** sexual intercourse encouraged by the media. The messages conveyed in the media do not include any reference to issues concerning the transmission of infections.

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[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Canadian Association for Adolescent Health, *Sexual Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours of Canadian Teenagers and Mothers of Teens*, [online], [www.acsa-caah.ca] (consulted May 12, 2008).

[28] Louise-Maude RIOUX SOUCY, "Sexe à risque", *Le Devoir*, April 16, 2005, p. A-6.

# The obsession with body **image**

The plethora of sexual messages in the media encourages young people to value a stereotypical body image resembling that depicted. This image constitutes, for each sex, a single body model that leaves no room for diversity in shape, age or size. In fact, the entire media world works towards presenting a model that is unattainable for the vast majority of people.

Young people are under enormous pressure to conform to this model. Influenced by a beauty ideal, adolescent girls and boys are convinced that they must conform to it to be fulfilled and so become obsessed with their body image. Asked in a Canadian study what they thought of their appearance, students in Secondary 1, 3 and 5 showed high rates of dissatisfaction with their bodies. Among boys, 34% would change how they look. In all age groups, more girls than boys would change their looks if they could: 41%, 48% and 43% of girls in Secondary 1, 3 and 5 were dissatisfied with their body image.[29]

Secondary students also believe that possessing good looks is important for being popular. Nearly 80% of boys in Secondary 1, 3 and 5 agree with this statement. The same answer was given by 82% of girls in Secondary 1, 85% of girls in Secondary 3 and 83% of girls in Secondary 5. Having nice clothes is also considered by more girls than boys to be a criterion for popularity in all three age groups.[30]

We know that people with a negative perception of their body image have a distorted view of their appearance and the different parts of their body. They tend to feel uncomfortable with their body, to be embarrassed or anxious about it. On the contrary, people who have a positive body image have an accurate perception of their body and appreciate each part of their body as it is. They believe that physical appearance is not a measure of a person's character and worth and refuse to spend an unreasonable amount of time worrying about their weight.[31]

The obsession with body image, with its harmful consequences for health and self-esteem in adolescents, is one of the effects of the sexualization of the public sphere. The desired transformations are themselves stereotyped. Among boys, male stereotypes promote a strong, tough, muscular body. The *Enquête sociale et de santé 1998* [1998 Health and Social Survey] tells us that 18% of 15- to 19-year-old boys would like to gain weight, while this is true for only 3% of girls.[32] Many girls want to conform to a body ideal that is thin, which can lead to severe eating disorders. According to the *Enquête sociale et de santé 1998*, 55% of 15- to 19-year-old girls would like to lose weight, compared with 15% of boys in the same age group.[33]

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[29] Council of Ministers of Education, *Canadian Youth, Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Study: Factors influencing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours*, *op. cit.*, p. 31-32.

[30] *Idem*, p. 45.

[31] National Eating Disorders Association, *Body Image*, [online], [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org] (consulted January 26, 2008).

[32] Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Enquête sociale et de santé 1998*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

[33] *Ibid.*

The plethora of sexual messages in the media encourages young people to value a **stereotypical body image.**

As they grow older, an increasing number of girls succumb to this pressure to be thin, as was confirmed by the *Enquête sociale et de santé auprès des enfants et des adolescents québécois 1999* [1999 Québec Child and Adolescent Health and Social Survey]. The survey findings indicate that, at age 9, 35% of girls would like to be thinner; this figure increases to 44% by age 13 and to 53% by age 16. Conversely, the rate declines with age for boys, dropping from 27% among 9- to 13-year-olds to 22% among 16-year-olds.[34]

**Did you know?**

- More than 40% of girls in Secondary 1, 3 and 5 are dissatisfied with their body image.

- 18% of 15- to 19-year-old boys would like to gain weight, while this is true for 3% of girls.

- 55% of 15- to 19-year-old girls would like to lose weight, compared with 15% of boys in the same age group.

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[34] Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Enquête sociale et de santé auprès des enfants et des adolescents québécois 1999*, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

# The **recommendations** of the Conseil du statut de la femme

The Council finds that the fight against sexual and sexist stereotypes and efforts to achieve equal relationships have **failed.**

In light of the analysis of the image of women and the sexual roles depicted in the media, the Council finds that the fight against sexual and sexist stereotypes and efforts to achieve truly equal social gender relationships have failed. We have demonstrated that sexual content is increasingly pervasive in the media used by young people and that the depiction of sexuality is primarily based on a stereotyped view of social gender relations. We have also demonstrated that young people, both girls and boys, are influenced by the sexual models portrayed in the media and that this is harmful to their development. In addition, we have observed an increase in their use of media which are difficult to control.

Therefore, the Council believes that the government must promote equal relationships between men and women by encouraging the development of critical thinking (with respect to the sexualization of the public sphere and the propagation of stereotypes) and by increasing stakeholder accountability. It has formulated its recommendations to this end.

**The advisory report shows that:**

- Sexual content is increasingly pervasive in the media and is based on a stereotyped view of sexuality.

- Young people's behaviour is influenced by the sexual models portrayed in the media.

- The use of media which are difficult to control is increasing among young people.

# Ten **recommendations**

The Council believes that the government must **promote equal relationshipships** between men and women and submits 10 recommendations.

Achieving equal sexual relationships is an integral part of bringing about equality between men and women. Therefore,

> 1 **The Council recommends that the government step up the fight against sexual and sexist stereotypes. The measures contained in the action plan and policy on gender equality to promote egalitarian models and behaviours in matters of sexuality and sexual relations must be reinforced.**

Promoting equal relationships to young people, particularly in the context of sexuality and romantic relationships is, in the Council's view, one way to counter the impact of the sexualization of the public sphere. This is why the Council believes that the work of the committee formed by the Secrétariat à la condition féminine to promote equal gender relationships must be continued, and its mandate expanded.

> 2 **The Council recommends that the government make the working committee for the promotion of equal relationships permanent and that it integrate the issue of sexualization of the public sphere.**

We have seen that the media can have a significant influence on young people's view of sexuality and social gender relationships.

> 3 **The Council recommends that the government run a large media campaign to promote equal gender relationships.**

Since the new ethics and religious culture program is intended to provide an ideal space for young people to reflect on values and standards in Quebec society, to become aware of their identity construction and to develop their critical sense, and since such a process is necessary in order to call into question how sexuality and sexual relations are depicted in the media,

> 4 **The Council recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport exhort teaching staff to address the issue of gender equality in the new ethics and religious culture program, both in elementary and secondary school, using the resources provided by the Ministère to support its appropriation.**

In the Quebec Education Program, there is no clear reference to the concern with gender equality in the development axes of the broad area of learning entitled "Living together and citizenship." Therefore,

> 5 **The Council recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport encourages consideration of the concern with gender equality in citizenship education, starting in elementary school.**

While information for parents is available, the Council has observed that it is sometimes hard to find. It therefore believes that the information must be more effectively disseminated and made as widely accessible as possible for parents.

**6 The Council recommends that the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux ensure that information for parents on youth sexuality is more effectively disseminated.**

The Council finds initiatives to help parents improve their supervision of computer use in the home very worthwhile and would like these initiatives to reach a greater number of parents.

**7 The Council recommends that the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux engage in initiatives to inform parents about Internet use.**

Given the positive impact of the *Déméritas* and *Éméritas*[35] awards instituted by the Council, and the fact that the promotion of egalitarian models and behaviours in advertising would serve to counteract stereotypes, advertisers should be encouraged once again to promote non-sexist roles and behaviours.

**8 The Council is involved to a contest to promote egalitarian images in different media vehicles.**

In order to ensure that standards are more closely respected and to clarify certain definitions, in particular what is meant by abusive images of sexuality, gratuitous violence and the denigration of women.

**9 The Council would like to see the standards tightened by the advertising industry and broadcasters concerning sexual stereotypes.**

Given the increased use of sexual stereotypes in advertising, the Council believes it is necessary to take steps today similar to those taken in the 1980s to promote the code of ethics to advertising agencies in Québec and to raise their awareness of the impact of stereotypes.

**10 The Council recommends that the Minister responsible of the Status of Women organizes annual meetings to sensitize advertising world to the impact of sexual stereotypes.**

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[35] The *Déméritas* and *Éméritas* awards were created in 1980 and continued until 1989. Every year, women's groups were invited to vote for one good and one bad advertisement. These competitions contributed significantly to raising awareness of the negative impact of the dissemination of false and often degrading images of women.

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**Sex in the media: obstacle to equal relationship Summary of the advisory report of the Conseil du statut de la femme**

This document is a summary of the advisory report *Le sexe dans les medias : obstacle aux rapports égalitaires.*

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